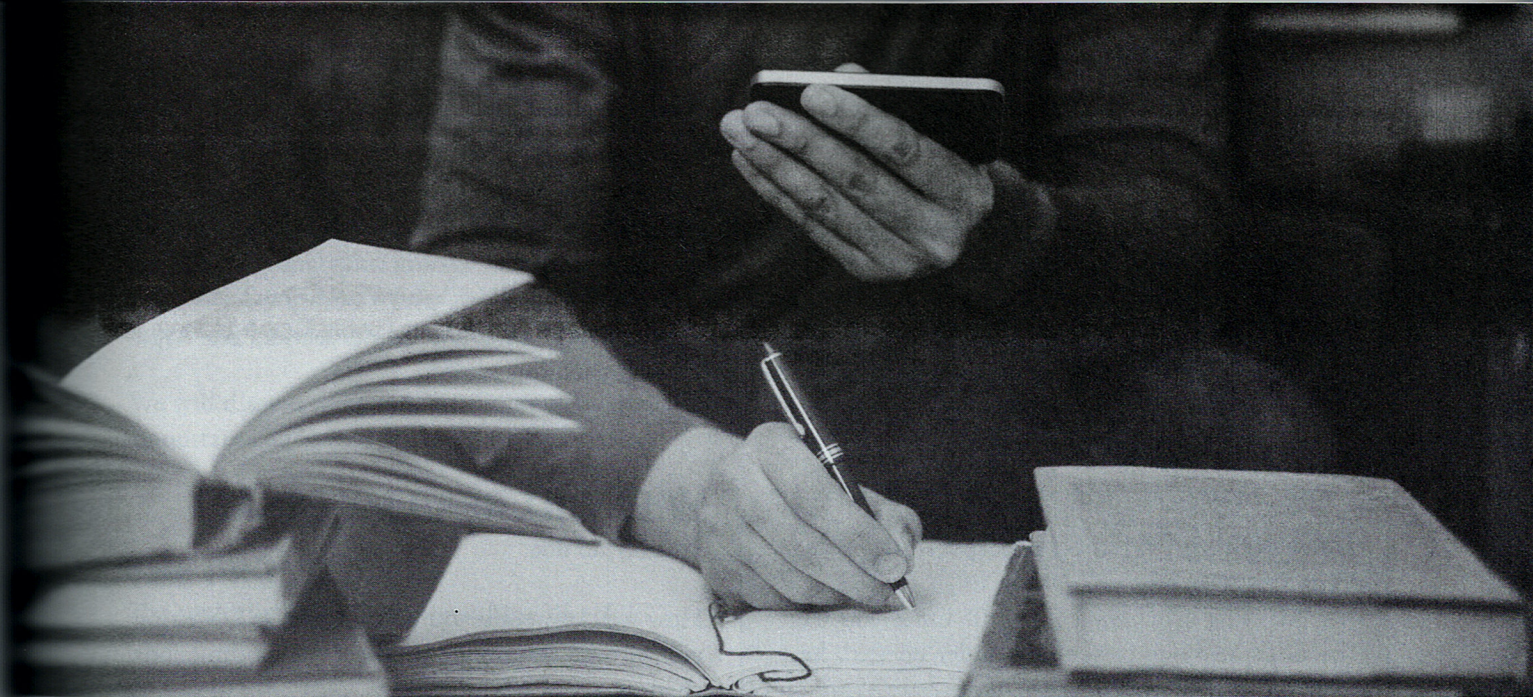




Chapter 5

LSAT Writing

LSAT Writing is a 35-minute ungraded essay with an assigned topic. The LSAT Writing test is administered online separately from the LSAT and must be completed within a calendar year of your LSAT administration. Copies of your essay will be sent to law schools, along with your LSAT score, as part of your official report, so you'll want to do the best you can with the assignment you receive.

Writing Sample

Give this section all the time that an unscored section deserves.

HOW MUCH WILL MY ESSAY AFFECT MY LSAT SCORE?

Not one bit.

Only three sections contribute to your LSAT score: one Games section, one Arguments section, and one Reading Comprehension section.

If the Writing Test Is So Unimportant, Why Discuss It?

Just for your own peace of mind. Once you have the other sections of the test under control, look over the rest of this chapter. If you are short on time, you'd be better off practicing Arguments.

There's also the possibility that an admissions officer will accidentally pass his or her eyes over what you have written. If your essay is ungrammatical, riddled with misspellings, off the topic, and wildly disorganized, the admissions officer may think less of you.

Now, we're going to assume that the Writing Test counts a little bit. You should assume the same thing, but don't lose sleep over it. No one ever got into law school because of the LSAT Writing, and it's doubtful that anyone ever got rejected because of it either. Besides, good writing requires surprisingly few rules, and the rules we'll review will help your writing in general.

WHO WILL READ MY ESSAY?

Possibly no one.

How well or poorly you do on the LSAT Writing will almost certainly not affect your admissions chances.

THEN WHY DO LAW SCHOOLS REQUIRE IT?

Law schools feel guilty about not being interested in anything about you other than your grades and LSAT scores. Knowing that you have spent 35 minutes writing an essay for them makes them feel better about having no interest in reading what you have written.

WILL THE TEST CHANGE?

Always be sure to check the LSAC website at www.lsac.org for any updates to the test.

WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?

The general directions to the Writing Test mention that law schools are interested in three things: essay organization, vocabulary, and writing mechanics. Presumably, writing mechanics covers grammar and style.

What They're Really Looking For

Researchers at Educational Testing Service (the folks responsible for the SAT and the GRE, among other tests) once did a study of essay-grading behavior. They wanted to find out what their graders really responded to when they marked papers, and which essay characteristics correlated most strongly with good scores.

The researchers discovered that the most important characteristic, other than “overall organization,” is “essay length.” Also highly correlated with good essay scores are the number of paragraphs, average sentence length, and average word length. The bottom line? *Students who filled in all the lines, indented frequently, and used big words earned higher scores than students who didn’t.*

We will discuss these points in more detail later. Because organization is the most important characteristic, let’s start with that.

THE PROMPT

The typical prompt looks something like this:

The program manager of a public television station intends to purchase a documentary program on diabetes and has narrowed the choice down to two programs. Write an argument for purchasing one program over the other, taking into account the following:

- The program manager wants to increase youth awareness of diabetes by engaging a younger audience.
- The program manager wants to air a well-researched and accurate depiction of the challenges of living with diabetes.

“What’s Up, Doc?” tells the story of 19-year-old Carlene, a popular rap artist. A physician who worked with Carlene is interviewed, but the documentary focuses primarily on Carlene, her family, and the musicians who work with her. The discussion centers on how Carlene has dealt with her diabetes since it was diagnosed at the age of 14. Carlene explains the innovative and interesting ways she found to integrate the daily monitoring and control of the disease into her very demanding schedule. The program touches on risk factors, warning signs, complications, and self-care skills for managing diabetes. Carlene ends the program by directing a plea to teenagers to learn about the symptoms of diabetes and become more aware of the disease.

“Living with Diabetes” is an investigation of teenagers with diabetes in four different high schools across the country narrated by Andre Smith, a well-known, prizewinning health reporter. Smith interviews a number of students with the disease, along with school administrators and teachers, about the effect of diabetes on the students’ lives. He visits local hospitals and counseling centers to interview doctors and psychologists, who outline the various physical and psychological effects of diabetes. The camera also takes viewers to the Diabetes Research Institute’s information outreach program, where visitors meet researchers and learn what they are doing to find a cure for the disease. Included in the program are detailed descriptions of treatment options available and their costs, as well as advice about prevention and testing.

Writing Sample prompt from PrepTest 44

Every LSAT prompt instructs you to make a decision and develop an argument for it. Use the skills you've honed from the Arguments section of the test to help!

What Am I Trying to Do?

You're trying to persuade your reader that one of two given alternatives is better. You cannot *prove* that one side is better; you can only make a case that it is. The test-writers deliberately come up with balanced alternatives so that you can argue for either one of them.

Just choose a side and justify your choice.

Picking Sides

The directions emphasize that neither alternative is “correct.” It doesn't matter which side you choose. Pick the alternative that gives you more to work with.

Another way to decide is to compile a little list of the pros and cons on your scratch paper. Then simply pick the alternative whose list of pros is longer. Let's see how you'd do this with the sample topic we've given you.

First, list each alternative (“What's Up, Doc?,” “Living with Diabetes”) as a heading. Underneath each heading draw two columns, one for the pros and one for the cons. Spend the first couple of minutes brainstorming the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. The key to brainstorming is *quantity*, not quality. You can select and discard points later.

Having brainstormed for pros and cons, select the ones you intend to keep and arrange them in order of importance, from *least* to *most* important.

For the purposes of this chapter, let's assume that we intend to give the nod to “Living with Diabetes.”

Don't Forget the Cons

Some students believe that if you're trying to make a case for something, you should bring up the advantages only. This is wrong.

To persuade readers that “Living with Diabetes” is the better choice, you must show that you have considered every argument that could be made for “What's Up, Doc?” and found each one unconvincing.

Your argument, in other words, must show that you have weighed the pros and cons of *both* sides. The more forceful the objections you counter, the more compelling your position becomes.

Evaluating the Pros and Cons: the Criteria

As you think of pros and cons for each position, keep in mind the given criteria. Here you have two considerations—appealing to a younger audience or presenting an accurate depiction of the challenges of living with diabetes. You must build

your essay around these criteria, so don't ignore them. They give you the structure to follow.

The criteria may not be compatible. If so, weigh the pros and cons in light of this situation. In our example, a documentary featuring a young person living with diabetes might not appeal to a broader audience. You may want to rank the two criteria in terms of importance. Perhaps appealing to a larger number of viewers is more important than getting a younger audience. Decide which consideration is more important. If you cannot decide, state so explicitly.

Can I Raise Other Issues?

You *must* weigh the two stated considerations, but nothing prevents you from introducing additional considerations.

You need not raise additional considerations, but if one occurs to you, and you have the time, mention it in passing. If none occurs to you, mention in the conclusion that you have evaluated the two options in view of the two stated considerations only, acknowledging that other considerations may be important.

"What's Up, Doc?" Versus "Living with Diabetes": Brainstorming the Pros and Cons

Remember, brainstorm first. You can use scratch paper to jot down your ideas before you dive into writing the essay. Next, select the issues you intend to raise. Then, rank the final issues, beginning with the least important.

To organize your brainstorming, use a rough chart like the following one:

	Engages Young Audience	Contains Accurate Research	Other stuff
What's Up, Doc?	Probable; popular young subject; personal story	Anecdotal information provided; one interview with healthcare professional	Direct plea to teens to learn more about symptoms
Living with Diabetes	Possible; four stories of youth; well-known reporter	Interviews with multiple subjects and healthcare professionals; detailed descriptions of treatment	Advice about prevention and testing



Beginning Your Essay: Restating the Problem

Having brainstormed the pros and cons of each choice in light of the considerations, you are ready to start writing your essay.

Your first paragraph should do little more than state your argument. Try not to use a tedious grade school opening such as, “The purpose of the essay I am about to write is to...”

There are several more interesting ways to introduce an argument. Which one you choose will influence how you organize the rest of your essay. Keep this in mind as you sketch your outline. We’ll tell you more about this as we go along.

One possibility for an opening is simply to restate concisely the problem you are to address. Check out the following example:

The program manager must choose a documentary film about diabetes. The manager wants to engage a young audience while providing accurate and well-researched information about the disease. The two documentaries both have positive and negative aspects that must be weighed in light of the program manager’s needs.
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This type of introduction sets up the conflict rather than immediately taking a side. The second, third, and fourth paragraphs are then devoted to weighing the specific advantages and disadvantages of each candidate. The author’s preference isn’t stated explicitly until the final paragraph, although a clear case for one should emerge as the essay progresses.

An essay such as this is really just an organized written version of the mental processes you went through in deciding which documentary to choose. In the first paragraph you say, in effect, “Here are the problems, the choices, and my decision.” In the second, third, and fourth paragraphs you say, “Here are the pros and cons I weighed.” In the fifth and final paragraph you say, “So you can see why I decided as I did.”

Your hope is that the reader, by following your reasoning step by step, will decide the same thing. The great advantage of this kind of organization is that it *does* follow your mental processes. That makes it a natural and relatively easy method.

Beginning Your Essay: Putting Your Cards on the Table

It’s also possible to write an essay in which you begin by announcing your decision. You state your preference in the first paragraph, back it up in the middle paragraphs, and then restate your preference with a concluding flourish in the final paragraph.

Here's an example of such an opening paragraph.

The documentary film "What's Up, Doc?" shows the daily life of a popular young figure with diabetes which would probably engage a young audience.
However, its focus on the life of a single person with the disease may prevent it from providing important information about diabetes. The film "Living with Diabetes" on the other hand would provide the program manager with a documentary about several young subjects that provides important details about diabetes. The program manager should select "Living with Diabetes" because it best suits the needs of the station.

By introducing your argument in this way, you leave yourself with a great deal of latitude for handling the succeeding paragraphs. For example, you might use the second paragraph to discuss both documentaries in light of the first consideration, the third paragraph to discuss both documentaries in light of the second consideration, and the fourth and final paragraph to summarize your argument and restate your preference.

The Body of Your Argument

We've discussed the introductory and concluding paragraphs. Depending on your preference and on the essay topic you actually confront, we recommend three variations for the middle paragraphs.

Variation 1

- Paragraph 2: Both sides in light of the first consideration
 Paragraph 3: Both sides in light of the second consideration

Variation 2

- Paragraph 2: Everything that can be said about "What's Up, Doc?"
 Paragraph 3: Everything that can be said about "Living with Diabetes"

Variation 3

- Paragraph 2: A sentence or two for "What's Up, Doc?", followed by three or four sentences for "Living with Diabetes"
 Paragraph 3: A sentence or two for "What's Up, Doc?", followed by three or four sentences for "Living with Diabetes"

Again, if necessary, you can divide any one of the three middle paragraphs into two paragraphs.

All three variations do the job. Choose a variation you feel comfortable with and memorize it. The less thinking you have to do on the actual exam, the better.

The Princeton Review Thesaurus of Pretty Impressive Words

The following list of words is not meant to be complete, nor is it in any particular order. Synonyms or related concepts are grouped where appropriate.

- example, instance, precedent, paradigm, archetype
- illustrate, demonstrate, highlight, acknowledge, exemplify, embody
- support, endorse, advocate, maintain, contend, espouse, champion
- supporter, proponent, advocate, adherent
- dispute, dismiss, outweigh, rebut, refute
- propose, advance, submit, marshal, adduce
- premise, principle, presumption, assumption, proposition
- advantages, merits, benefits
- inherent, intrinsic, pertinent
- indisputable, incontrovertible, inarguable, unassailable, irrefutable, undeniable, unimpeachable
- unconvincing, inconclusive, dubious, specious
- compelling, cogent, persuasive
- empirical, hypothetical, theoretical

Rules to Write By

1. Write as if you were actually making the recommendation.
2. Write naturally, but don't use abbreviations or contractions.
3. Make sure your position is clear.
4. Write as neatly as possible.
5. Indent your paragraphs.
6. Don't use first person. The assignment is formal enough that it isn't appropriate here. The objective isn't to state what "I think," but to argue in favor of one option or the other. Personal experience is not relevant.

A Note on Diction

Make sure you don't spoil your display of verbal virtuosity by misusing or misspelling these or any other ten-dollar words. Also, get your idioms straight.

A note on a common diction error: if, as in our writing sample, your choice involves only two options, *former* refers to the first and *latter* refers to the second. You cannot use these words to refer to more than two options.

Another common diction error occurs when two or more things are compared. The first option is *better* than the second, but it is not the *best*, which is used when discussing three or more options.

One Final Reminder

Don't forget to use spell-check.

A Sample Essay

A programming manager for a public television station is choosing a documentary film about diabetes and has narrowed the choice to two. "What's Up, Doc?" is a documentary about the popular young rap artist living with diabetes and would engage a young audience. "Living with Diabetes" is about diabetes in four high schools and provides details about the disease and its treatments by interviewing students, teachers, and healthcare professionals. With these considerations in mind, the program manager should choose "Living with Diabetes."

"What's Up, Doc?" would be extremely engaging for a young audience since it shows the life of a popular rap artist. It would also show some of the ways an individual has managed to cope with the daily challenges caused by the disease as well as point out the importance of testing and early detection. But this documentary would not be thoroughly researched or comprehensive in its coverage of diabetes in youth. By showing the life a single person and relying primarily on her and her family to provide information, this documentary is also unlikely to be completely accurate. While this documentary film would be engaging to a young audience, the cost of greater engagement would be important details and accuracy.

"Living with Diabetes" will also be engaging to a young audience since it focuses on youth as a subject. The popular reporter will also encourage audiences to watch together with families. By looking at diabetes in four different high schools, audiences will get a thorough picture of what daily life is like for a young person with diabetes and his or her family, friends, and teachers. This documentary also interviews multiple healthcare professionals so it is more likely to provide accurate medical information. These professionals also provide helpful information about diabetes prevention and testing. By targeting a young audience and providing comprehensive, accurate information about diabetes this documentary meets the needs of the public television station.

Both documentary films have strengths and weaknesses in regards to the program manager's specific needs. The public television station should choose "Living with Diabetes" for the diabetes documentary because its strengths outweigh its weaknesses.

Summary

- Don't worry about the LSAT Writing test. As long as you spend a little time brainstorming and outlining your essay, this inconsequential section should be no problem.

